Report on
Proposed Location for Town Hall
Together with Other Changes
Suggested
in
Watertown Square

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Action Taken at Town Meeting
Watertown
October 28, 1919

"Article 9. To see what action the Town will take for the acquiring of land and preparation of plans for a municipal building, or take any action relating thereto."

"Voted: That a Committee consisting of the Selectmen and the Planning Board by virtue of their office, and seven others to be appointed by the Moderator, be appointed with authority to investigate and report at the Annual Town Meeting of 1920, upon the general plan of a municipal building with recommendations as to a prospective site."
Report of the Town Planner on the Selection of a New Town Hall Site

To the Planning Board,
Watertown, Mass.

Dear Sirs:

In accordance with your request we have made a survey of the Town with a view primarily to recommending a site for a Town Hall. The instructions under which we have worked are included in the action taken by the Town on April 1st, 1921, as follows:

"Voted: That the Planning Board secure an expert study and survey of the Town, to wit: the section bounded by Cross Street on the west, Taylor and Riverside Streets on the east, Galen Street Bridge on the south and Boston and Maine Railroad tracks on the north, this to include a possible site or sites for a municipal building or buildings, or suggest other treatment or development of the said civic center as they shall determine, and to report thereon to the Town through the Town Hall Site Committee."

THE SURVEY

As a basis for our studies and recommendations a simple survey has been prepared, which, however, furnishes all the data necessary to give sufficient knowledge of the existing conditions for our purpose. The information obtained has been shown graphically on a number of prints of the map of Watertown and submitted to the Planning Board.

The general plans or diagrams of the surveys are four in number; namely, the Existing Conditions, Main Thoroughfares, Public Properties and Population Distribution.

The first of these survey plans, entitled Existing Conditions, shows the public and semi-public properties, railroad and industrial property, stores, main roads and car line streets. The second diagram gives a graphic separate presentation of main thoroughfares. The third diagram shows public properties independent of the other features on the Existing Conditions map. The fourth, the population distribution by enumeration districts, in accordance with the 1920 U. S. Census.
In addition to the data covering the entire area of the Town, more detailed surveys have been made showing valuations, property lines and building occupation of that section of the Town described in the vote under which our work has been done. We have considered this area as Watertown Square and recommend that it be known as such. The use of the term “Beacon Square” for part of the area seems to us confusing.

We also submit with this report as a contribution toward the understanding of the local conditions a collection of Watertown photographs covering the region of Watertown Square and other near-by sections studied in connection with the present town planning project.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The gist of the recommendations, based upon painstaking field work, consultations with the Planning Board, and a careful consideration of all the local conditions as shown by the Survey, are as follows:

1. That the property known as the Kelly Corner, bounded by Mt. Auburn, Arsenal and Taylor Streets, be purchased and developed as the site for the proposed Town Hall.

2. That the property known as the Morse and Hosmer et al. location, between North Beacon and Riverside Streets, be acquired also and held for future public and semi-public buildings, the actual locations and sites to be determined and allotted as occasion arises in the future.

3. That building lines be officially established in accordance with the plan which we are submitting, entitled “Proposed location for Town Hall, together with other changes suggested in Watertown Square.”

4. That Spring Street from the Railroad to Main Street be abandoned as a street, and a new traffic way to Merchants Row opened.

5. That the present Delta in the Square be improved and developed as proposed on the plans submitted.
REASONS FOR THE RECOMMENDATIONS

The general location for the Town Hall building has been pretty commonly agreed upon, and our recommendation coincides in the main with the conclusion reached by the New Municipal Building Committee and submitted by them a year ago. However, the exact location of the site, the orientation of the building and the preparation of a comprehensive scheme of improvements for Watertown Square involves more than merely selecting a Town Hall site. Such action cannot be taken as an independent problem, because it is intimately related to and dependent upon the right solution of other town planning questions, especially those related to traffic regulation and control.

All things considered, the lot recommended for the Town Hall site appears to us the best for the purpose. It is accessible, dominant in its relation to the Square, adequate in area, suitable in shape (provided the new property and building lines are established), and reasonable in cost. The fact that this property is at present covered by buildings of quite unusual unsightliness, while not an important reason for our recommendation, is an additional advantage that would result from its public acquisition and development.

We are of the opinion that the acquisition of the Kelly site would not be sufficient in itself, but that the Town should also acquire and control the unusually well-located block on the axis of Main Street between North Beacon Street and the Metropolitan Park Reservation. This property does not appear to us as well adapted as the Kelly site for the Town Hall itself, but Watertown needs now sites for other buildings, and will require more in the future. Moreover, the merit of the Kelly property as a Town Hall site depends to some extent upon the control and proper occupancy of the Morse and Hosmer property.

Our conviction as to the preëminence of the sites recommended as the best locations for the center of the Town life was not reached without a thorough-going examination and study of all other possible sites fronting on the Square, and also those in the neighborhood of Saltonstall Park—practically the only alternative region. Our studies and examination of local conditions in the field served only to confirm the conclusions that we had reached.

Of almost equal importance with the selection of the Town Hall site and provision for future buildings is the improvement of the
whole appearance of Watertown Square and the more adequate provision for the steadily increasing traffic by the establishment of the new building lines as recommended, the completion of the clearing and improvement of the triangular park, the change in the outlet of Spring Street and the relocation of the car tracks. The exact character of these proposals can better be appreciated by reference to the plan submitted. (See end of report.)

Spring Street at present comes into the Square at a most inconvenient point and tends unnecessarily to congest Main Street traffic. To divert it as we have recommended would, we believe, prove of decided advantage. We have indicated on the plan a method of taking care of the service requirements of all existing buildings. The section of Spring Street that we advise vacating could be built over in the future, or developed as an attractive shopping arcade.

The Main Thoroughfare diagram submitted as part of the local Survey brings out clearly the importance of Watertown Square as regards the traffic lines that pass through Watertown. Practically all vehicles bound to Boston on the north side of the river, as well as most of the cross traffic between Cambridge and Newton — which is considerable — goes through this intersection. This centering of the traffic gives to Watertown Square peculiar prominence, and has caused it to become an index of Watertown. Moreover, this Square has long ceased to be merely a town center. It is an important focal point in the whole Metropolitan District. An examination of the map of Watertown in its relation to the circulation problems of the District and the Town will make clear that no other intersection in Watertown, now or in the future, can compete in importance with Watertown Square. While the Square is not geographically the center of the Town, it is the permanent center of business, traffic and interest, and very close also to the center of population. The three most populous enumeration districts all abut on the Square, and the center of population as located from the government figures is within a block or two of the Main Street-Mt. Auburn Street corner.

CONCLUSION

The construction of a new Town Hall in Watertown has been under general discussion for decades, and definite plans of merit have been presented and considered for at least seven years. The
The present Town Hall dates from 1850, and although creditable in its day, it has long since outlived its usefulness, and the site is not suitable for a new municipal building. The time for Watertown to decide has come. Action should be farsighted. It should be based upon a comprehensive plan and the adoption of a definite program for carrying out the plan logically, step by step, to a conclusion. A comprehensive program should include appropriate sites for the Town Hall and other public buildings, the establishment of a permanent and satisfactory layout for the entire Square, other necessary street changes leading into the Square, the consideration of more remote but related town planning problems, and the voluntary action of property owners in and about the Square with a view to the gradual improvement of the architecture of the business blocks.

The opportunity of Watertown to carry out at this time a substantial, successful and creditable piece of public work is quite unusual. It can be done now without burdensome expense, and will unquestionably bring large returns in practical convenience, higher property values, increased taxation and in civic pride. Watertown, like most other places of its size, stands in need of town planning. There are many important unsolved problems of streets, zoning, playgrounds and parks, housing, etc. Good work has already been done by the local Planning Board, and its report of 1914 is an admirable outline of the kind of practical services that town planning could render. The call now is to put recommendations into effect. No better start could be made than with the Town Hall, a project that should have the interest and backing of all citizens.

Respectfully submitted,

JOHN NOLEN,
Town Planner.

Cambridge, Mass.
May 26, 1921.
II

Action Taken at Various Town Meetings and Report of Municipal Building Committee

At the Annual Town Meeting for the year 1920, the Special Committee appointed October 28, 1919, reported as follows, viz.:

REPORT OF NEW MUNICIPAL BUILDING COMMITTEE


To the Citizens of Watertown:

At a Town Meeting held October 28, 1919, it was voted:

“That a committee consisting of the Selectmen and the Planning Board by virtue of their office, and seven others to be appointed by the Moderator, be appointed with authority to investigate and report at the Annual Town Meeting of 1920, upon the general plan of a municipal building, with recommendations as to a prospective site.”

In compliance with the foregoing vote your committee has given the matter of a site and plan careful consideration.

The present Town Building was erected prior to 1850. Partially destroyed by fire, some few years later, it was restored and has been in constant service ever since. In the early days a portion of the lower part was rented for business purposes, and a druggist and a grocer held forth where now the municipal business is transacted. Stern justice was administered in another portion of the building in Watertown’s first Police Court. Police and Fire Headquarters were here, the Public Library, the School Department—in fact, at one time or another the old building housed every branch of municipal activity. The upper portion has served as a meeting place for our citizens for Town business, for patriotic assemblies, for religious services of all denominations, and for social gatherings that covered all the wide range from wrestling matches to cotillions and Shakespearean drama.

On the third floor, under the eaves, our local sharp-shooters perfected their aim, and sometimes the odor of good cooking wafted downward proclaimed that the late banquet was being served while the dance waited in the hall below.

The Police Court has passed into history. The Public Library, the Police and the Fire Departments have long since, like grown-up children, gone forth each into new and more imposing abodes of their own. The
banquets have departed and the lights of the feast are long extinguished. The marksmen, in the exigencies of war, have risen again from the shadows, but they too will soon, like the "baseless fabric of dreams," fade and pass away — whenever the Fire Commissioners find that the rifle-range is being used again for that or for any other public purpose.

From time to time the old structure has been pieced out, patched up, added to and made over. The steady growth of municipal machinery has created, for sorely distracted Town Fathers, difficult departmental housing problems; but with invention, born of dire necessity, they have always been able to discover some new nook or cranny where homeless officials could find at least temporary shelter.

The transformations accomplished sometimes have been most astonishing. For instance, our genial Town Clerk, himself a pillar of righteousness, finds himself now domiciled in an alcove above what once served as the entrance to the fearsome dungeons where the unruly of our early citizens were hurriedly propelled to seek a night's repose in narrow confines where penitence and remorse found them in the cold, gray dawn of the morning after.

Even here he cannot be undisturbed while he ponders over his musty records or ministers to the bashful bridegroom, because the Selectmen, finding their own once restful and dignified executive chamber turned into a public information booth and general thoroughfare for all departments, have sought haven with him. Nor have they or he found more than partial seclusion even there, for this very sanctum is the direct path for official traffic through the building.

The Treasurer and the Collector of Taxes are in cramped quarters at some distance from the vaults where their important records must be kept.

The Auditor is tucked away in a small compartment hewn out from under the main stairway, and with his desk, safe and adding-machine in place, can give audience to only one visitor at a time.

The Water, Health and School Departments might individually occupy the quarters allotted to all three, and have no spare room. The Building Department, Tree Warden, Moth, Poles and Wires, Weights and Measures, Charity and Mothers' Pension, like step-children, are all huddled together in the annex, so called, in cramped, poorly lighted quarters, where privacy is impossible, where confusion must creep in, and efficiency suffer.

Many of the Boards and Committees have no permanent abiding place, but must migrate from post to pillar.

It all has an element of humor in it, but it is not good business for the Town. It is not compatible with the dignity and solidarity of orderly, responsible government.

The old building has served the Town well. It is centrally located, it is rich in historic traditions, but the world and the Town have progressed beyond it.

We believe the Town should begin at once planning for a new, modern, municipal building, adequate for all its needs, future as well as present.
We believe that the general type desired would be along the following lines:

1. Municipal offices for the various branches of Town government.
3. A meeting hall for these and kindred organizations with a seating capacity of 400.
4. A hearing room with a seating capacity of 100.
5. An auditorium with a seating capacity of from 1,000 to 1,500, this hall to be equipped with a modern stage, cinema apparatus, balcony, coat rooms, etc.
7. Public sanitaries and vaults.

Such a building would probably cover an area of 20,000 cubic feet. A building of this character, happily placed, would be a tremendous asset to the Town. Not only would it be a delight to the eye and an inspiration to us all, but it would be an advertisement to the world of local interest and pride in our municipal management. Such a building would offer a convenient and appropriate social center for large community gatherings of churches and other organizations, and would aid immeasurably in the development of a fine community spirit.

POSSIBLE SITES

In the matter of an appropriate site the committee considered only locations bounded by the present Town Hall building on the west; the Boston & Maine Railroad tracks on the north; Taylor Street, and the property abutting on Beacon Square on the east; with the river as a natural bound on the south. This area is the heart of our present business and civic center and its whole natural layout lends itself easily to a development that any municipality should prize. Practically twelve streets radiating in as many directions converge at Beacon Square. From the center of this area or from any angle of it the outlook in its present development is far from attractive. Most of the buildings which fall under the eye are no longer objects of beauty or of great usefulness. Some would deserve a worse characterization—unsightly, fire hazards, a menace to health. Most people like to have that part of their home most frequently on exhibition well-groomed and attractive. Our center falls far short of that and our reputation as a tidy, thriving, up-to-date community suffers, at least with those whose knowledge of us is based only on what they see in our principal square.

It does not take much vision, however, to observe the possibilities of this precise locality—how a little skilful planning, begun in time, could transform this now unattractive area into one of the beauty spots of Boston's famed suburbs.

The triangular lot bounded by Main and Galen Streets, and Mount Auburn Street extension, as its lines are now located, is one of the first obstacles to the development of the center. Besides being unsightly, the congestion caused by increased automobile and electric car traffic has
made of the narrow stretch of street between the Otis Building and Barnard's Block an extremely dangerous thoroughfare. The necessity of widening Main Street at this point is daily apparent, and as widening can only come on the southerly side it means the acquiring and destruction of the Barnard Block property. A portion of the remaining vacant land in the rear of the building is Metropolitan Park Property, and by a legislative permission which expires in April, 1922, this land will be released to the Town when the Town acquires the front parcel, if that happens before April, 1922. Hence the need of prompt action.

The land left after the suggested widening would not be sufficient for a municipal building, nor, in the opinion of the committee, would it be a desirable location. When the lot is cleared and the new Union Market Bank Building rises at the westerly side of Watertown Square, that part of the Town Center will be improved tremendously.

Looking across Beacon Square in an easterly direction two prominent available sites for a municipal building loom up. They are the Kelly corner property, so called, and the Morse and Hosmer et al. location, on the opposite side of Beacon Square.

The former location is bounded by Mount Auburn Street (Beacon Square), Arsenal, Taylor and the Boston and Maine Railroad tracks. It has an area of 59,824 square feet and is assessed on a valuation of land and buildings of $67,050. It is believed that it could be acquired at a cost not in excess of $80,000.

The Morse and Hosmer et al. property is bounded by North Beacon and Riverside Streets, the latter separating it from the end of the Charles River Drive leading out of Beacon Square. This parcel has an area of 174,822 square feet; an assessed valuation in lands and buildings of $49,745; and could probably be acquired for not more than $60,000.

Almost any new development of the Kelly corner lot would be an improvement. It would seem as if the money necessary to acquire it would be well spent if only the buildings were levelled and the land beautified. A stately municipal building rising upon it would beautify it still more and increase the value of business property across the street in both directions from Beacon Square.

The Hosmer, Morse and adjoining properties, in the judgment of the committee, would make an ideal location for a splendid Civic Center, which might include a group of municipal buildings, with roomy approaches laid out in generous proportions.

Such a development would stand for the next century, a monument to the civic pride and foresight of our townspeople. It is a vision that many would like to see realized or at least well begun. Much of the detailed development could not come in our day, but if the land could be secured now the site would be saved, and the right development would come in good time.

Our enthusiasm for the project is only cooled by the size of our municipal purse, and the knowledge of other imperative demands that must be made upon it. We have a "Municipal Building Fund," wisely established
in 1912 with the sum paid into the Town Treasury by the Mt. Auburn Cemetery Association for the surrender of the Town’s tax lien upon property acquired for burial purposes. In 1922, this sum with its accumulations of interest, altogether about $30,000, will be available for a building. This fund may be increased meanwhile from other sources. In time, too, the proceeds of the disposal of the present site for a business location would swell the fund.

If only some good angels could be found among us with vision and public spirit and the means to back both, who would acquire this latter site and hold it as Trustees for the Town until the Town itself could finance it, the rest of us and posterity would bless them for it.

We should like to see the Town acquire both these parcels for municipal purposes. As practical men, however, influenced by the knowledge of our immediate municipal burdens and responsibilities, we must shut our eyes, temporarily at least, to a part of the vision we should like to see take shape.

We can and do recommend now only the acquiring by the Town of the so-called Kelly corner site. We advise that this be done at once and that the Town seek authority from the Legislature, if that be necessary, to acquire it, and for permission to borrow for that purpose, outside the debt limit, the sum of $80,000.

Respectfully submitted,

P. SARSFIELD CUNNIFF, Chairman,
HERBERT G. MASON, Secretary,

GEORGE S. WRIGHT, ERNEST K. INGALLS,
CHARLES M. ABBOTT, G. FREDERICK ROBINSON,
ALBERT B. HALL, WILLIAM H. LUCAS,
GEORGE W. AYER, ERIC L. JOHANSON,
WILLIAM W. RUGG, WALTER B. SNOW,
JOSEPH R. COONEY, CHARLES F. SHAW,
THOMAS F. TIERNEY,

Municipal Building Committee.
At the Annual March Meeting of 1920, the following action was taken:

"March 22, 1920: ARTICLE II: To see if the Town will authorize the Selectmen for and in the name and behalf of the Town to take, or acquire by purchase, or by gift, or otherwise, as a place for a Town Hall or for other public work, the land located at the corner of Mt. Auburn Street and Beacon Square, and bounded by Mt. Auburn Street, Beacon Square, Arsenal Street, Taylor Street, and land of the Fitchburg Railroad Company, said land being owned by Edward C. Nolan and others and containing in all 59,824 square feet more or less, appropriate the necessary money to pay the cost or damages therefor, direct how the same shall be raised, or take any action relating thereto. 109 in favor, 50 opposed."

"Voted: That the Selectmen be, and they are hereby authorized to petition the General Court for such legislation as will enable the Town, acting through its Selectmen, to take, acquire by purchase, or otherwise, for the purpose of a Town Hall, or for other public uses or works, a parcel of land bounded by Arsenal Street, North Beacon Street, Mt. Auburn Street, Taylor Street and the location of the Fitchburg Railroad Company, containing 59,824 square feet, more or less, and owned by Edward C. Nolan, et al., and for the purpose of paying the cost of the same to borrow the sum of eighty thousand dollars ($80,000) upon such terms and conditions as the Town Treasurer, with the approval of the Selectmen, shall determine, and the amount so borrowed not to be reckoned within the statutory limit of indebtedness of the Town."

In compliance with the vote of the Annual Town Meeting of 1920, the following Act of the Massachusetts Legislature was passed on May 25, 1920.

(Chap. 499)

AN ACT TO AUTHORIZE THE TOWN OF WATERTOWN TO TAKE LAND FOR A TOWN HALL OR OTHER PUBLIC PURPOSE.

Be It Enacted, Etc., as Follows:

SECTION 1. The Town of Watertown, acting through its Selectmen, may take in fee, or acquire by purchase, gift or otherwise, for public purposes, a certain parcel of land in the said Town bounded by Arsenal Street, North Beacon Street, Mt. Auburn Street, Taylor Street, and the location of the Fitchburg Railroad Company, containing fifty-nine thousand eight hundred and twenty-four square feet, more or less, and may construct thereon a town hall or other municipal building, or may utilize the same, or any part thereof, for a park or for any other public purpose.

SECTION 2. If the Town takes the whole or any part of the said land by right of eminent domain, the method of taking, and the assessment and recovery of damages resulting therefrom, shall be the same as are provided by law in the case of land taken for highways.

SECTION 3. To meet the liabilities that may be incurred under the provisions of this act, the Town of Watertown, through its Treasurer, acting
under the direction of the Selectmen, may borrow, in excess of the statu-
tory limit of indebtedness, such sums not exceeding eighty thousand dol-
lars, as the same may be required, and may issue the notes or bonds of
the Town therefor, all of which notes or bonds shall be payable within
twenty years from their respective dates, and in accordance with the pro-
visions of Section fourteen of Chapter seven hundred and nineteen of the
Acts of nineteen hundred and thirteen.

SECTION 4. This act shall take effect upon its passage. (Approved
May 25, 1920.)

At a Town Meeting held April 1, 1921, the following vote was passed:

"VOTED: That the Planning Board secure an expert study and survey
of the Town, to wit: the section bounded by Cross Street on the west,
Taylor and Riverside Streets on the east, Galen Street Bridge on the
south and Boston and Maine Railroad tracks on the north, this to include
a possible site or sites for a municipal building or buildings, or suggest
other treatment or development of the said civic center as they shall
determine, and to report thereon to the Town through the Town Hall Site
Committee. For the purpose of carrying out this vote the sum of $1,000
was added to the appropriation for the Planning Board."